

Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of the Benefits and Barriers of Common Planning

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated what one group of middle school teachers (N = 50) perceived to be the benefits and barriers of Common Planning Time (CPT). The teachers surveyed were from one suburban public middle school in a Mid-Atlantic state. Results reported in the present study derived from 26 items included in the *Benefits and Barriers of Common Planning Time* section of The National Middle Grades Research Project Common Planning Time Teacher Survey. These items focused on how teachers perceived CPT at their school, what they found that did and did not work during CPT, and their professional development needs with regard to CPT. Results indicated the three primary benefits of CPT for teachers were: (1) open lines of communication with their team leaders; (2) their ability to work with others; and (3) their high expectations for student achievement. The most commonly reported barrier to CPT was that teachers believed they did not have enough time to achieve their goals. This study reports on these findings and discusses implications of implementation of CPT for researchers and practitioners.

Common Planning Time (CPT) is widely accepted by middle school educators as an essential component of middle grades education. Unfortunately, CPT is being threatened in various ways for numerous reasons. For example, as Thompson, Franz, and Miller (2009) found, many schools struggle with lack of teacher buy-in and lack of principal leadership. Similarly, Drolet (2009) found that teachers are asked to participate in CPT but do not have sufficient training to make the event successful. Perhaps the greatest roadblock to successful implementation to consistent CPT arises from the competing demands on teachers' time. Educators are continually asked to participate in state and national initiatives that can distract them from continuing what they do on a daily basis. The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) have now been implemented, and teachers need to take time to become familiar with them. While time spent learning the new standards may prove to be valuable, it can also lead to less time for other practices, such as CPT. Adding to the literature on the benefits of CPT can lead to more informed school administrators who can in turn advocate for the importance of implementing CPT in middle schools.

A growing body of research supports CPT and lends credence to its importance as a viable model to support students (Mertens & Flowers, 2003; Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, & Caskey, 2010; Warren & Payne, 1997). Furthermore, the position statement of the National Middle Schools Association (NMSA), *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), notes that interdisciplinary teaming and CPT are essential elements of organizational structure at the middle grade level. The statement maintains that effective middle schools need grade level teams of teachers who have clearly delineated time to discuss student needs and issues. NMSA (2010) calls for schools that promote purposeful and meaningful learning and maintains that a school's organization, which includes interdisciplinary teams and CPT, has significant impact on student achievement.

It is important that educators and researchers continue to explore the benefits of CPT and barriers to implementing it in middle schools with specific attention to how teachers perceive this model. While anecdotal reports indicate that many middle school educators believe in its value, research on CPT is scant.

Interdisciplinary Teaming and Common Planning Time

An *interdisciplinary team* is comprised of a group of teachers from different subject areas who teach the same group of students, creating a small unit within a large school (Mertens & Flowers, 2004). For example, if a school has 500 seventh graders, there may be five teams of 100 students. The teachers on each team would know these 100 students well and follow their progress throughout a school year. One of the most important features of interdisciplinary teaming is the incorporation of CPT, "a regularly scheduled time during the school day when teachers who teach the same students meet for joint planning, parent conferences, materials preparation, and student evaluation" (Kellough & Kellough, 2008, p. 394).

The positive impact (e.g., academic efficacy, fewer behavior problems, higher student achievement) of interdisciplinary teaming and CPT is well documented (Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Erb & Stevenson, 1999; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Warren & Payne, 1997). Moreover, the amount of time teachers spend planning with their colleagues has been found to be critical in effective team planning (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000a; Thompson et al., 2009). The following sections describe findings related to the benefits of CPT, including positive school climate, increased collaboration, and improved student achievement.

School Climate

Common planning time has been reported to have a favorable impact on school climate, level of collegiality, and positive views of the school environment (Lipsitz, 1984; Rice, 2003; Warren & Muth, 1995; Warren & Payne, 1997). CPT has also been found to foster feelings of teacher optimism. For example, Warren and Muth (1995) conducted a

study that examined different teaming structures within middle schools and found that teachers on interdisciplinary teams with CPT had more positive views of their work environment than their counterparts without CPT.

In another study, Warren and Payne (1997) investigated personal teaching efficacy and teacher opinions about school climate in 12 middle schools that used three different models of planning: interdisciplinary teams and CPT, interdisciplinary teams without CPT, and a traditional structure of individual teacher planning with neither teams nor CPT. Teachers (N = 82) in each of the three groups were compared using a teacher efficacy scale and a teacher opinion questionnaire. Findings revealed that teachers who used both interdisciplinary teaming and CPT reported significantly higher personal efficacy than participants in either of the other groups. Furthermore, teachers in the interdisciplinary CPT group reported higher perceptions of their school climate and more faculty cohesiveness than the other two groups.

In a qualitative study with middle school teachers engaged in the practice of CPT (N = 8), Mee (2010) investigated how teachers spent their common planning time. During the study, she attended CPT meetings, took notes, reviewed existing data, and interviewed teachers. Findings showed that teachers identified time to collaborate with their colleagues during CPT as a main factor in enhancing their overall perception of their school climate. Participants stated that being able to meet weekly with their colleagues to discuss student issues, vent frustrations, and solve problems collaboratively led to more positive perceptions of their jobs. A key factor in effectively implementing common planning time was the support of the administrative leader. In this school, the administrator fully supported teachers using CPT, and this support, in combination of a clear understanding of the model, enhanced a positive school climate.

Middle school students have also endorsed the impact of CPT on school climate. Warren and Muth (1995) conducted a study of 494 eighth-grade students and reported that students on teams with teachers who participated in CPT were significantly more satisfied with school than those with teachers who did not participate in CPT. Specifically, students whose teachers used CPT reported more positive reactions to teachers and higher opinions of school climate.

In addition to teachers and students, one study (Rice, 2003) demonstrated that a principal's use of CPT positively impacted climate and increased collegiality within the middle school. In this case study, Rice (2003) used journals, interviews, and questionnaires in conjunction with observing a first year principal's attempt at building a culture of collegiality. Findings indicated that with CPT, teachers enjoyed working on a team, felt less isolated from colleagues, and benefited from sharing instructional strategies.

Collaboration

Another important aspect of CPT is that it allows time for collaboration among peers. Research indicates that the more teachers collaborate, the greater the positive impact on their teaching practices. Mertens, Flowers, and Mulhall (1998) defined *high levels* of CPT as a minimum of four meetings per week lasting at least 30 minutes each. Middle school teams with high levels of CPT reported that they enjoyed engaging in team activities, collaborating, and sharing, and they felt positive about members of their team (Flowers et al., 2000a).

Studies have shown additional benefits for teachers who use the collaborative CPT model, including more integrated classroom instruction (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000b) and an increase in the amount of time teams spend on individual student needs (e.g., conducting parent conferences, planning team events; MacIver, 1990). For example, in a six-year longitudinal study, Felner et al. (1997) found that teachers who reported engaging in high levels of CPT also reported engaging in high levels of classroom instructional practices that benefited the students. Another study (Flowers et al., 1999) revealed that teachers who had more time to collaborate during high levels of CPT reported greater job satisfaction, more parental interaction, and a larger number of advisory groups that were teacher led when compared to teachers with lower levels of CPT. Students also benefitted in social/emotional ways from teachers who had more time to collaborate. For example, students who attended schools where teachers had high levels of CPT reported less depression and fewer behavior problems (Mertens et al., 1998).

Student Performance

In addition to a positive perception of school climate and enhanced collaboration, increased student achievement has also been related to the use of interdisciplinary teaming and CPT. Mertens and Flowers (2003) found that middle school teachers had difficulty linking curriculum coordination and integration with student achievement. To address these challenges, they conducted a study that examined the influence of interdisciplinary teaming and CPT on student achievement in high poverty middle schools. The study was conducted with over 3,500 teachers in 121 schools at the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois in order to examine the relationship between classroom practices and student achievement. They investigated teaming combined with common planning, family income status, and levels of CPT to determine the effect on student achievement. Findings indicated that sustained levels of CPT were associated with increased student achievement as measured by state student achievement data (i.e., standardized tests). Similarly, Flowers et al. (1999) found that schools with teaming had higher student achievement scores than schools without teaming as reported in the state assessment for reading and mathematics.

Cook and Faulkner (2010) reported in a case study of two Kentucky middle schools that the main focus of the work done during CPT “is on the academic and relationship needs of the students” (p. 10). Teachers in these schools sought to meet their students’ relationship needs and enhance their academic experience through a multi-pronged approach: planning field trips, assisting students who were having academic or behavioral problems, and planning for augmentation of instruction and assessment. Common planning time provided a forum for teachers to discuss students on their team with the goal of helping students achieve at a higher level.

National Middle Grades Research Project

The present study was conducted as part of the National Middle Grades Research Project (NMGRP) on Common Planning Time. The driving force behind the project was the need for more middle grades’ research and more middle grades’ researchers, and the desire to “expand the existing research and knowledge on common planning time and serve to fill the gaps in our research base” (Mertens et al., 2010, p. 5). While it is known that CPT is an important component to the middle level school structure, little is known about what teachers perceive as benefits and barriers of the practice. Filling in this gap in the research was the primary purpose of the project. The following five questions were addressed in the NMGRP survey.

1. What are teachers’ understandings of CPT?
2. How do teachers use their CPT?
3. How are teachers prepared professionally to use CPT?
4. What are the perceived benefits of CPT?
5. What are the perceived barriers to CPT?

The primary foci of the data analysis for this study were Questions 4 and 5. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of middle school teachers as to benefits and barriers of Common Planning Time.

Method

Participants

Fifty teachers at one suburban public middle school in a Mid-Atlantic state participated in the study. The school was located in a county with 200 schools, 142,000 students, and more than 11,000 teachers. It had a population of 940 students and 57 teachers. Participation in the study was optional. All teachers, Grades 6 – 8, were invited to the school computer lab during their planning period to complete an online survey. The teachers submitted the surveys anonymously.

Eighty percent of the participants were female; 84% were Caucasian, 5.8% were African-American, 5.8% were Asian, and 4.3% were Hispanic. The majority of teachers had taught from 1 to 15 years, but about one-third of them (34%) reported that they had taught 15 or more years. There were four teams of teachers in the study. Teams One (n = 15), Two (n = 13), and Three (n = 14) represented interdisciplinary groups of sixth through eighth grade teachers. Team Four (n = 12) taught extracurricular courses (e.g., music, art, physical education).

Measures

The researchers used the quantitative component of the National Middle Grades Research Project (NMGRP), an online teacher survey (Flowers, Mertens, Anfara, & Caskey, 2009) that addresses 10 major themes of Common Planning Time (see Table 1). Results reported below consist of 26 items included in Theme 6, *Benefits and Barriers of Common Planning Time*.

These items focused on how teachers perceived CPT at their school, what did and did not work during CPT, and professional development needs with regard to CPT.

Survey questions asked participants to determine if each item occurred during their planning time. They rated each item on a five-point Likert-type scale (1. *Strongly Disagree* – 5. *Strongly Agree*). Each statement began with “Teachers on my team...” Sample items included *demonstrate effective leadership; have an open line of communication with the team leader; work to motivate students*. This survey has a high rate of overall reliability. Cronbach's Alphas for the entire scale and the Benefits and Barriers subscale were .934 and .926, respectively. The Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group collaborated with the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois to develop this survey, and CPRD retains all rights and ownership of it (Flowers et al., 2009).

Table 1
Common Planning Time Teacher Survey Theme Summary

Theme	Number of Items
1. Curriculum and Instruction	9
2. Coordination Activities	6
3. Developing and Coordinating Assessments	8
4. Parent Contact	4
5. Regular Business Activities	4
6. Benefits and Barriers of Common Planning Time	26
7. Team Decision Making	14
8. Professional Development Participation	10
9. Professional Development Needs	10
10. Teacher Preparation and CPT	3

Procedures

Survey administration. We administered the Common Planning Time Teacher Survey (Flowers et al., 2009) in June 2010 in the middle school computer lab following the protocol of the NMGRP, which included: meeting the teachers at the school, discussing the project with them in small groups, administering the survey through an online web format, and answering any questions they had. Participants completed the survey in approximately 20 minutes.

Data analysis. We used frequencies and percentages to analyze teacher responses to the *Benefits and Barriers* section of the survey. First, we determined that aspects of CPT that teachers *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with were *benefits* and analyzed these as such. Second, we determined the aspects of CPT that teachers *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* with were *barriers* and analyzed these as such.

Results

Over 50% (> 25) of teachers either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that at least one-half of the items (13) included in the survey were present in their use of CPT (see Table 2). The highest ranked item, endorsed by 74% of teachers, was Item 10, *have open lines of communication with the team leader*. Three items were ranked second (62% of teachers): Item 11, *maintain contact with other teachers in their area of content specialization*; Item 16, *have high expectations for student achievement*; and Item 18, *communicate high expectations for achievement to students*. Items ranked third (60% of teachers) included Item 2, *recognize and solve individual student problems*, Item 9, *share professional material and information with each other*, and Item 7, *work well together in a group*.

The greatest barrier (i.e., the item that teachers most often perceived as not occurring during their CPT) was Item 21, *our team has enough time during our regular team meetings to achieve our goals*. Eight respondents (17%) *strongly disagreed*, and 14 respondents (29%) *disagreed* with this statement.

Table 2

Teachers strongly agreed or agreed with benefits of CPT

Survey Item	Ranking	Frequency	%
1. Work to motivate students.	6	27	54
2. Recognize and solve individual student problems.	3	30	60
3. Maintain a positive relationship.	8	24	48
4. Work to make learning developmentally appropriate or child-centered.	12	19	38
5. Get to know students as individuals.	10	22	44
6. Effectively act as coaches/facilitators to promote active involvement of students in learning activities,	9	24	48
7. Work well together as a unit.	3	30	60
8. Respect each other's opinions and ideas.	4	29	58
9. Share professional material and information with each other.	3	30	60
10. Have an open line of communication with the team leader.	1	37	74
11. Maintain contact with other teachers in their area of content specialization.	2	31	62
12. Understand their roles and responsibilities.	4	29	58
13. Are sufficiently trained in teaming and/or working in groups.	12	19	38
14. Demonstrate effective leadership.	10	22	44
15. Endorse the effectiveness of the educational practices they are being asked to implement.	13	17	34
16. Have high expectations for student achievement.	2	31	62
17. Hold equally high expectations for student achievement regardless of student's background.	5	28	56
18. Communicate our high expectations for achievement to students.	2	31	62
19. Recognize or reward students for meeting achievement expectations.	11	20	40
20. Understand the purpose of common planning time.	10	22	44
21. Our team has enough time during our regular team meetings to achieve our goals.	14	14	28
22. Our team has an agenda or plan of action for each team meeting.	7	26	52

23. The time our team meets together is usually well spent.	11	20	40
24. We usually meet the goals/plans set forth in our team meetings.	11	20	40
25. Team meetings are collegial.	6	27	54
26. I find the team meetings to be beneficial to me as a teacher.	10	22	44

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate what middle school teachers perceived as occurring during their common planning time (CPT). While past research has shown the positive impact of CPT (Lipsitz, 1984; Rice, 2003; Warren & Muth, 1995), this study further informs by highlighting what teachers reported as benefits and barriers of CPT.

Benefits

We identified three primary benefits of CPT as perceived by teachers: (1) open lines of communication with their team leader; (2) ability to work with others; and (3) high expectations for student achievement.

Open lines of communication with the team leader. The survey item that was most agreed upon as being a benefit of CPT was *open lines of communication with the team leader*. While past research addressed collegiality among members (Lipsitz, 1984; Rice, 2003), research on communication with the team leader is scant. We hear much about middle school teachers working on teams, whereas the notion of working well with the leader of the team is often overlooked. Because the job of an education leader is multifaceted, he or she needs to think first about the well being of the students and then the staff (Shapiro, Poliner, Gross, & Shapiro, 2008). Perhaps the team leader acted as a mentor when teachers had issues that arose with students or fellow team members. This *trusted other* was available to give advice within the school setting. The team leader may have also helped teachers support students within the CPT framework, whereas other school supports may have been difficult to access. For example, to receive help for a student from a specialist, a teacher may need to go through many steps to set up a meeting. The use of CPT provided a support system that was accessible throughout the week at scheduled times. Teachers knew when meetings would occur and that the team leader might have some of the information about that student at hand.

Ability to work with others. The second most commonly agreed upon benefit was *maintain contact with other teachers in their area of content specialization*. This supports Rice's (2003) findings that CPT can reduce teacher isolation. Perhaps these teachers felt that working with others in their content area was helpful because this time offered opportunities to share resources, discuss curricula areas, and collaborate well with other stakeholders. Likewise, while working with the same students, teachers were able to make the most of their collective knowledge concerning individual students. For example, if a student was having difficulty in one class but not in another, the team could meet and approach the issue as a unit. This allowed teachers to have more impact than if one teacher worked with a student individually.

High expectations for student achievement. Teachers noted additional benefits of CPT, including *high expectations for student achievement* and ability to *communicate high expectations to the students*. Cook and Faulkner (2010) indicated that teachers' primary use of CPT was working on student needs. It has also been shown that high levels of CPT (i.e., four 30-minute meetings per week) lead to more integrated classroom instruction (Flowers et al., 2000b) and greater gains in student achievement (Flowers et al., 1999). Perhaps teachers in this study had similar perceptions of their use of time and the relationship between time and high expectations for achievement. CPT may have encouraged team members to tease out their expectations, compare them with colleagues, and share them with students. For example, if one teacher believed students should be able to meet a certain benchmark, team discussion with other members may have raised their expectations to that benchmark. Team teachers then would have communicated these common expectations to their students. Thus, high expectations may have been contagious and shared goals of the team may have benefited all students.

Barriers

The most commonly reported barrier to CPT was that teachers did not feel they had *enough time to achieve their goals*. This finding is worrisome, but not surprising. It has been found that high levels of planning have a positive influence on instruction and student achievement (Flowers et al., 1999; Flowers et al., 2000b) and that teachers who have more time to plan with their teams spend more time on their students' needs (MacIver, 1990). In today's complex educational sphere, however, teachers spend much of their already limited time complying with federal and state regulations, such as Common Core State Standards, and attending to individual student supports; therefore, CPT may be cut short. In contrast, team members with more time may have opportunities to identify and work through students' needs, consider expectations, and contemplate best practices for their shared students. Having more time for common planning may also allow teachers to discuss ideas and pedagogy with one another and openly reflect on their teaching. Whereas some teachers find that working with others when a lesson is not successful can be helpful, such collaboration may only benefit students if the team is able to fully delve into these problems without feeling rushed.

Limitations

One limitation of the present study was that it was conducted at only one school. We chose this school because it was accessible and because it was engaged in CPT. While this limitation may impact the generalizability of the study, it was beneficial to see how CPT was viewed by one group of teachers. Similarly, a second limitation was that the school was in a suburban, upper middle-class area outside a large metropolitan city. Therefore, the issues that these teacher teams may have dealt with could have been inherent to this group of students and may not be applicable to students with other demographics. A third limitation was that many of the items that measured the benefits of CPT were based on how teachers perceived others on their team, as opposed to how teachers perceived themselves or their own behavior.

Future Research and Implications for Practice

Student achievement has always been the main focus of schools, and it is becoming increasingly important as we move to implement the Common Core State Standards. It is also an important aspect of CPT that has not been explored in light of these new standards. If we want to continue to advocate for CPT in middle schools, we need to link its function in the schools to student achievement. Future research should investigate incorporating teachers' perceptions of CPT with data on student achievement. Questions to consider include: Is there a relationship between student achievement and schools that engage in CPT? Does the level of CPT (i.e., amount and frequency of time) impact student achievement?

Collegiality has been reported to be an outcome of CPT (Mee, 2010), but the impact of collegiality and expectations for students has not been explored. The present study could be expanded by using self-report surveys to measure the relationship of teachers' perceptions of collegiality with the consistency of student expectations across teams.

Another area for future research is the comparison of teachers' perceptions and beliefs of CPT in different school settings. Research questions may include: Do teachers in different settings (e.g., grade levels, size, demographic composition) have different perceptions of the benefits and barriers of CPT? Do different schools structure CPT differently? What are the commonalities of CPT across different schools? Investigations into these questions may inform teachers and administrators on how to best implement CPT in their own schools.

Participants in the present study endorsed benefits of CPT as open lines of communication with their team leader, working with others, and maintaining high expectations for students. These findings can be viewed as preliminary corroboration that educators may use to develop, support, and protect CPT in their schools in order to create effective working communities that support high expectations and achievement

for their shared students. Despite tight schedules, CPT may prove to be time well spent.

In conclusion, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) calls for middle grades education that empowers students with knowledge and skills to achieve in society. The results of the present study suggest that CPT responds to that call, as teachers who are provided consistent opportunities to engage in collegial discussions and interactions have the potential to develop a shared vision of more effective and efficient means of supporting student growth and achievement.

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